

The Old Man of the Forest



The Old Man Of the Forest became ill. Thinking his days to be coming to an end, he lay down against a big tree, older than himself. He bid his offspring farewell, and sent them away, to walk their own paths.

"I have lived long and well." He said to himself. *"I depart this world in peace."*

And so the pain of death overtook him, and he faded away and died.

But a small part of him did not die. That small part of him remained there sitting beneath the old tree, and he slept, and rested, and regained strength. And when he awoke he was surprised to be still alive.

He stood and looked around him, and felt the bark of the tree, and felt the breeze through his hair. These things felt familiar to him. *"Is this what it feels like to be dead?"* He

wondered.

So he walked through the forest, and his body felt strong, but his spirit felt powerless, and he was somewhat frightened.

And he came to a place where a grand pine tree stood, but it had been burned by lightning, and was dead. It was then that the Old Man of the Forest realized that he could no longer see the world as it really was. He could no longer move through time to other Nows. His feet could carry him in any direction through space, but his spirit could not carry him anywhere through time. There in front of him was the dead pine tree, and although he knew there must be infinite Nows in which the tree had never burned, he could not see them, and he could not move away from this Now, where it had burned.

He was chilled with horror to be trapped with the dead tree, so he used his feet to carry his body away from it, since there was no other way he could escape.

And so the Old Man walked through the forest, but he no longer felt as if the forest belonged to him. He felt as though for all the many paths in time through the forest, he was only able to follow one narrow path, and could not turn aside in either way.

Clouds darkened the sky, and rain began to fall. The Old Man walked in the rain, and marveled at the cold of it, and at the way it deeply soaked his hair. He had felt the kiss of rain before, but he had never walked long in the heavy rain. Wherever rain falls, it also does not fall, but he could not move away from the Now in which this rain fell, so he was forced to continue in it.

After a time, the rain ceased, and the Great Sun broke through the clouds. As her warmth slowly dried his dampness, he marveled. "*On a path through time in which the rain falls,*

does it always cease in this way?" He wondered to himself. "Are there paths through the rain, where the rain never ceases?" In his full life in the real world, he could have explored the paths of rain, to see where each would lead, but now that part of him was dead, and the rest of reality was closed to him.

The Old Man thought of the Great Sun. In all places, and in all Nows, the sun takes only one path in every Now. "*Perhaps this is how the Great Sun feels as she walks through the sky*" he said to himself, and he was less afraid.

As the Great Sun descended low in the sky, the Old Man smelled a strange animal scent. He recognized it as the stink of the Fire People. The Old Man disliked the Fire People. He always kept to the paths of the Nows that passed furthest from the Nows where the Fire People walked. "*Fire People are little more than animals.*" he said to himself. "*They only see what is in front of them.*" This thought gave the Old Man pause. "*Am I like them now?*" He wondered. "*Could it be possible that the Fire People think and feel as my people do, and that they only seem like animals because their spirits are trapped in a single Now, with only their feet to carry them? Are they, like me, trapped along a single path through time, just like the Great Sun?*"

And so the Old Man resolved to seek out the Fire People, and to observe them more closely. Their scent was easy to follow, and the path where their feet had cut carelessly into the soil was easy to find.

Soon the Old Man came upon two females of the Fire People, and even at a distance, he could see that his approach had filled them with fear. For a moment, he himself was also fearful, for there was no other Now that he was able to retreat through. Had he come upon them in the real world, he could have moved aside into a Now in which they had gone another

way.

When he remembered that he must use his feet, he hid his body behind a tree, and watched and listened.

The two Fire Women stopped on the path and spoke excitedly in a language he had never heard before. They gestured with their hands, and babbled to one another, and then they retreated in the direction from which they had come.

It had been a very very long time since the Old Man had observed Fire People. They did not look as he remembered. They were brightly colored, like birds, but not like them, for nothing could have looked more out-of-place among the rocks and trees as they did.

The Old Man followed them carefully. Their scent, he could now smell, was subtly different from anything he knew. It felt alien to him, and his fear of them slowly grew, and he would have ceased to follow them, except that he could sense that they were also afraid. Though he kept himself hidden from them, on occasion he would tread on fallen leaves, or break a dry branch, and they would startle, and look over their shoulders, and walk faster, speaking in hushed whispers to one another.

The Great Sun sank behind the mountains. As darkness spread, and the Great Moon and her Stars awoke. Two bright fires suddenly erupted from the two women of the Fire People. Strange fires, that swayed back and forth, and burned brightly with no hint of the scent of fire.

Now the Old Man was terrified, and he ceased to follow. His spirit shrank with fear. "*I am not like the Fire People,*" he told himself. "*Though trapped in the Now as they are, I am much weaker than them. For they have the secrets of Fire that their ancestors stole from the Great Sun, and I have nothing but myself and my feet and my hands.*"

And so he stood still for a time, and breathed the night air, and watched the two strange white fires recede deep into the shadows of the trees.

"*What am I to do?*" he asked of the Great Moon. "*What other path can I walk?*"

And he stared into the Great Moon, and after a time, her grace and dignity calmed him.

"*I am one already dead.*" He said to himself. "*Why should I fear?*"

And so he continued walking, and his curiosity carried him, following the scent of the Fire People.

And he came to a place where the forest changed. A place where the trees were tamed, and the small plants did not grow. A place where the bare earth had been pressed flat, and the stench of the Fire People grew so strong that it broke apart into a multitude of strange scents.

Here he smelled fire, and meat, and the burning of meat. "*I am one already dead.*" he told himself again, and continued.

There beneath tall trees with their low branches stripped away, the Old Man saw a large fire, imprisoned in a ring of stones, roaring and crackling and straining up towards the dark sky, as if wanting to break free and fly away home.

All around the fire, the Fire People had gathered. There were many of them. Men and Women, Old, and Young. He recognized the scent of the two he had followed before, but he could not see which they were. The bodies of the Fire People confused him. Each looked so different, different in shape, different in color. They blurred together in his eyes. The tormented dance of the fire shone light on their wild bright colors, like every possible kind of flower, turning inward towards this false sun.

At first their voices chattered and rang out through the darkness, but slowly they

quieted. After a time, he could see that they were passing strange food among them, and eating it, and casting some of it into the fire. The strange smells were overwhelming. Their voices continued, but now only one or two would speak at a time, and the others would listen, or attend to their food.

Carefully, slowly, the Old Man drew closer, until only one bare tree trunk separated the light of their captive flame from the darkness that hid him.

The Old Man discerned that a certain old one was the leader of this band of Fire People. His body was broad. He was dark blue below the navel, like cold water, and his chest was bright red, broken into small patches, divided by straight lines that were frighteningly regular and unnatural. He was the only one with a thick hair growing from his face, but the hair did not grow at all on top of his head. When this chief spoke, all but the young ones heeded.

Now a woman who could have been one of those the Old Man of the Forest had seen before spoke to the chief. Now this chief of the Fire People spoke at length in their strange language, and all listened.

The Old Man of the Forest knew that this was a storytelling. "*These Fire People are nothing like animals.*" He thought to himself. He stared into the fire, and was mesmerized by the words, though he knew not their meaning.

And then the old chief spoke a word that the Old Man of the Forest understood, and he was started into awareness of himself.

The word had been a word of his own language. A word of his own people. The word for his own people.

Sasquatch.

These Fire People were no strangers. These strange looking strange smelling little creatures were friends. Friends long estranged, but still friends.

The Old Man stepped forward into the blinding circle of light. "I am here with you, old friends." he said, speaking loudly and clearly in his own language.

All faces turned towards him, all eyes wide, all frozen for a breathless instant like the rabbit in the instant before the hawk takes it, and then the voices of the Fire People exploded, with a howling and shrieking worse than any pack of wolves that could be imagined, and they scattered in every direction at once, like a school of tiny fish does when the water above them is disturbed, yet moving with all the weight and clumsiness of bears. One trode directly in the fire and kicked up a sheet of sparks like blasphemy to the stars of the night sky.

And so terrified was the Old Man that he cried out, as if in pain. And he felt his heart breaking apart inside him.

And for an instant, only the old chief remained sitting alone within the circle of firelight, staring wide-eyed, then standing, and turned his back, and vanished into the darkness after the rest.

When the Old Man remembered to again draw breath, he found that he could not.

The fire snapped and writhed, alone.

Almost all at once, three gigantic pairs of bright burning eyes opened in the darkness. The deep guttural roar of three impossible voices broke into rumbling song.

The Old Man collapsed to his knees. His soul screamed silently, trying to flee away into another Now, where none of this was happening. A crushing weight, like the pain of death slowly pushed inwards on him. He knew that escape was just the breadth of a thought in any

direction through time, but he could not move that way. And now his feet also had failed him, and he was trapped in space also. Only one Now. Only one Here.

One of the giant fearsome eyes was obscured suddenly, as the chief of the Fire People returned to the circle of light. He raised a smooth black stick to his eye, and fire came out of it, and then a clap like fast thunder, and then the crushing pain in his heart faded away, and the Old Man of the Forest fell to his face on the soil, and that last part of him which remained, died, and he faded entirely away, out of this world.

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